



CLIPPINGS a weekly column from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

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For Immediate Release

Witness Trees Rooted in History

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As I walked the beautiful Rock Valley Trails this spring, I passed the huge ancient elm dubbed 'Old Tree' by regular trail walkers. I thought, "If this tree could talk, what stories would it tell?" Perhaps Old Tree would tell of indigenous Sioux or Dakota Indians who hunted, fished or camped beneath its massive canopy. If this could be documented, it might become a Witness Tree.

What is a Witness Tree? Across the United States there are hundreds of trees that were alive during great events in American history. We have creditable evidence that some of these trees still stand as living witnesses to historic events. These are Witness Trees. In the 1930's, the United States War Department decided some of those trees were important enough to mark and protect. A potential Witness Tree could be identified using ageing techniques, historic maps, writings or photos. A tree with enough documented evidence to determine it actually 'witnessed' a historic event was marked with a small brass tag on or near it.

Memorial Day is our solemn day of remembrance for those who lost their lives in war and in acts of war perpetrated during times of peace. The holiday originated after the American Civil War to honor Union and Confederate dead. There are many documented Witness Trees that were present when soldiers marched onto battlefields and stood silently as soldiers fell during that historic war. There are also Witness Trees that were living during other challenging times in our history.

The list below names only a few:

At Valley Forge in Delaware, the scene of one of the most pivotal winters in American history, nearly every tree in the area was cut down in 1777 to provide wood for shelter and cooking for George Washington's army. Only the Maxwell and Pawlings Sycamore Witness Trees survive until this day.

During the War of 1812, Willow Oak 'witnessed' British troops defeat American troops in the Battle of Bladensburg, Maryland. The lonely oak with its thick, gnarled trunk still stands on a grassy field overlooking Washington, D.C.



'Old Tree' on the Rock Valley Trail,
May 2020

At Gettysburg two great armies of the American Civil War collided in the bloodiest battle in U.S. history. Across 6,000 acres of Gettysburg National Military Park, rangers have documented at least a dozen Witness Trees that were alive during that battle. Emancipation Oak at Hampton, Virginia, is the site where African Americans congregated in 1863 to listen to the first reading in the South of the Emancipation Proclamation.

After a terrorist's bomb ripped apart the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, one of the few things left standing was an American elm. Known as the Oklahoma City Bombing Survivor Tree, it has become a symbol of hope and optimism.

Recovery workers discovered a severely damaged Bradford pear tree amid the rubble of the World Trade Center after the September 11, 2001, attacks. The New York Parks Department rescued the tree and nursed it back to health. Replanted at the site in 2010, the September 11 Survivor Tree now stands as a symbol of survival and resilience.

Memorial Day celebrates the memory of those who have died in the service of the United States. Witness Trees are living memorials that help tell their stories.

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Pat Kusters, Iowa Master Gardener